



Mashup

short stories by Floris M. Kleijne

A Custom Anthology

MASHUP

A Collection

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Mashup - A Collection

Short stories by Floris M. Kleijne

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This collection contains works of fiction. The characters and events portrayed in these stories are either fictitious or used fictitiously. The views and opinions expressed in nonfiction articles that may appear in this book are not necessarily those of AnthologyBuilder.

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INTRODUCTION

mash-up (*noun, informal*): a mixture or fusion of disparate elements.

As in: a mobile OS that mashes up data from the cloud, the user's own data, and every other source it has access to; a kind of Siri-on-steroids, that excels at extrapolation to the point of clairvoyance. (The eponymous story that concludes this collection features exactly such an OS. Would you like it? And more importantly: would it like you?)

As in: a collection of science fiction, fantasy, horror, suspense, and mainstream stories, with only the author in common: a collection of all my published stories up until now. (Though not quite only the author. Some of them share my love for non-linear storytelling; others, twist endings; still others the funny and the weird; and a significant number my addiction to coffee.)

As in: the weird mental processes that mash up the conscious and subconscious elements that gel together to create a story.

Enjoy my mashup!

Floris M. Kleijne, September 2014

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DEEP RED

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

It is said that smell is the most evocative of senses. Until that afternoon, that had always been a meaningless saying to me.

* * *

When I came home from work and unlocked the front door — all three locks and the deadbolt — my nostrils were assailed, in order, by the odors of chlorine, board wax and window cleaner, signs that my housekeeper had been in that day. In this nasal cacophony of cleaning, it was all but impossible to smell anything else, but the reptile brain responsible for such associations picked out another subliminal scent when I walked in. Then my subconscious kicked in, and I should have taken heed.

A deep chill ran along my spine, one of those prolonged shivers that actually make your arms shake.

Unaware of what had set it off, I looked around the hallway, but nothing was out of order; new mail on the little table at the foot of the stairs where my housekeeper was apt to leave it in spite of my instructions about the kitchen table; the staircase to the second floor, remarkably neat with the mess of books and papers stacked on the third and fourth step. The three doors off the hallway were wide open, as I wanted them, and sunlight

spilled into the hallway, telling me all the curtains were open as well. The house smelled clean and aired out, and I could still detect underneath the cleaning smells the old wood, the fireplace and the plants I had surrounded myself with. All was as should be. There was nothing wrong.

My spine shivered again, as if shrugging off my self-assurance.

Maybe I had been living a safe and protected life for too long. Three years earlier, I would never have ignored a warning like that. Man, I must have felt safe to feel such sudden and inexplicable unease and not immediately call Mark. He had made me promise — swear — to call him the moment anything seemed wrong.

But there wasn't anything wrong, I told myself. This kind of random unease was to be expected, even now, even four years later. There is no way I would call Mark on the strength of a little random chill. They'd probably have to page him, he'd have to come in off the job, and all just to hold my hand?

So, yes, I guess I had become careless over the years, but wasn't there just a bit of pride at work as well? Sure. Sad thing is, the return of my self-esteem was supposed to be a good thing. It was that same pride that stopped me from doing a quick tour of the entire house. But I know now that wouldn't have made a hell of a lot of difference.

Walking into the den, I poured myself my customary half-shot of Scotch, then did a quick round of plant watering and settled into my favorite armchair. I glanced around the living room, wallowing in the luxury of coming home to a clean and

tidy house. Andrea thought the housekeeper was an unnecessary indulgence. She'd be happy to let herself in every now and then and do the same for free. But I didn't feel safe enough this early in our relationship to accept her offer and kept on paying Marge for my housekeeping.

Nipping from my glass of smoky gold, I dipped into my latest reading project. I found my page and entered the grim fictional world of Iain Banks as the whisky spread its warmth in my belly. The last chilly remnants of my scare at the door dissipated from my neck. I worked through two chapters before I felt myself nodding off. Then, marking my page and putting "Complicity" on the coffee table, I settled comfortably in my chair for my afternoon nap. There was nothing wrong. All was as should be.

* * *

The subconscious doesn't easily let itself be silenced. That afternoon, for the first time, the nightmare visited me in daytime. The dream, the replay of my darkest moments, had finally been retreating from my nights. Thanks to the move, to a therapist I could finally trust and to Andrea, I had been sleeping fairly well most nights. The haunted look had been receding from my eyes. I fell asleep that afternoon with no sense of apprehension at all.

But from the moment I saw the freakish, boiling clouds overhead, I knew with the powerless clarity of the lucid dreamer that my nightmare was upon me. With the same clarity, I knew I had no choice but to follow it through to the end.

CONVERSATION WITH A MECHANICAL HORSE

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

When I spotted the Automaton, I must have been three days up in the Squeeze. The sight had cheered me up – I could do with some conversation, and I knew just the way to get it to stop and talk to me. Animal Automatons were easily shocked.

I had seen its approach from afar, since the crossroads lay in a wide, virtually treeless plain of tall, cheerless grass and sad, thorny shrubs. In fact, the only tree in my field of vision was the one to my right, from whose lowest branch the Squeeze hung by a rusty chain. It was almost as if the tree was planted there to mark the crossroads. But that was a silly thought. Of course it was the other way around: the road connecting the City to the harbor had been aimed at the lone tree, as had the thoroughfare paralleling the coastline.

The horse-like device was closing in on the crossroads. As I watched it trotting towards me, I cycled through the repertoire of half-inch shifts and muscle contractions that kept the worst pain and stiffness at bay. Thus far, my minimalist exercise regime seemed to be serving its purpose: to make sure I would not freeze up in my balled half-squat position. The Squeeze did not allow for much more than twitches and tiny movements, but we were

counting on those to be enough.

Carefully, ever so carefully, I lifted my weight off my right butt cheek by pressing my shoulders into the curved bars on either side and contracting my back muscles, all the while breathing in slowly. When I felt the tiny piece of board start to lose its balance, I moved to the right just a little and settled down again. Perfect. The immediate relief of pressure and pain in that cheek was a blessing. Most of my weight was pressing down there, and I knew that without the piece of board, the narrow edge of the bar directly under my butt would have quickly caused unbearable pain. I had tried pushing forward and down with my feet to provide some relief for my butt, but had discovered that that way, cramps lay. And cramps would surely mean the end of me in this hellish device.

I moved my feet just so, allowing a different part of my soles to press into the horizontal bars. I shifted my hands on my upper arms and rolled my shoulders. Finally, I bent my neck and let my head roll from shoulder to shoulder, welcoming the pops and cracks that told me my neck was still in good working order.

Then I urinated, closing my eyes to experience fully the relief of relieving myself. I had timed it well. As the steaming flow hit the puddle three feet below me, I heard the low whine of the Automaton stopping, and the mechanical discord of its consternation.

“Oh,” it spoke, as close to stammering as an Automaton ever came, “I beg your pardon.”

“Begged and granted,” I murmured as the last drops splashed into the puddle. Opening my eyes, I took my time to admire the

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creature.

It would have been a gross overstatement to call it a mechanical horse. Automaton were amazing in many ways, but none of those ways involved beauty or physical grace. A mechanical donkey would come closer: a donkey constructed of tempered steel, pulleys, leather straps and wires. In this particular case, the Animator had gone to the trouble of designing a mouth, with a convincing set of rust-iron teeth. This attention to detail contrasted oddly with the almost complete lack of cover on its body; it was almost as if a metal donkey skeleton, partially muscled and bearing a complete metal head, had presented itself to me. Odd, yes, but it would have given away to me who the Animator in question had been, even if I *hadn't* seen it half-finished a few weeks before. There was a very sweet irony that it was *that* Animator's Automaton in particular that presented itself to me as I hung in the Squeeze, waiting for the end. Then again, it might not have been a coincidence at all.

"Thank you. What, may I ask, are you doing up there?"

"Waiting for Death," I said, and then, trying to dismiss the subject: "I bet I can guess who Animated you, Master Donkey."

It gave a passable imitation of a whinny, confirming the identity of its maker.

"I've always considered myself to be a horse, actually." It had been given a deep and not unpleasant voice that fitted its head remarkably well, though not its body. "But you can call me Barno. Who do you suppose Animated me, then?"

"I'm pretty sure it was old Petar."

"Right you are," acknowledged Barno, nodding its – his –

head for emphasis. "Petar was indeed my parent. Very perceptive of you, sir...?"

"It has been quite a while since I was last in a position to be called sir, but my name is Markus."

Barno whinnied again and abruptly raised his head high. The illusion of a startled horse was eerie.

"Markus, did you say? *You* are Markus?"

I smiled. I could imagine the contrast between the grim image of the infamous Markus that had undoubtedly been painted by the Constabulary, and the sorry Squeezed figure he saw before him. I was naked and bruised, with crusts of dirt and dried blood covering most of my body. With my brown hair tangled and beard gone wild, I must have looked more like one of the Wild Men of the Glens than like the much-feared highwayman. Even standing up, I would probably have surprised and disappointed Barno. At 5'8", I would have been able to look Barno in his beveled-glass eyes, but not over his head. Nor was I the beefed-up bundle of muscles he may have expected; my build was more that of a professional dancer or a mountaineer, tightly packed and sinewy.

Then again, what counted most might have been the simple fact that he had come upon me as I was pissing.

"Yes, I am Markus, and before you ask: yes, I am *the* Markus."

"So it is true," Barno mused. "Markus is caught! There was talk of it in the City, but hardly anybody believed the reports. The Constables were strutting around boastfully, but even they seemed caught by surprise, as if they had captured you by

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accident. Truth to tell, that is the word in the street: that a Constabulary patrol had stumbled over you lying asleep somewhere. I am one of the few curious enough to stroll out here for a look. And here you are.”

“Yes, here I am,” I answered with a smirk, indicating my circumstances with a quick turn of my head.

“If you don’t mind my asking, Markus: how *did* you end up in that contraption?”

I thought a moment. I did not mind in the least that Barno asked, but I was loath to give too much away to an Automaton, even one Animated by Petar. Barno seemed an Independent, but for all I knew, Barno had been found – and taken – by Nico, and that would mean Nico knew whatever Barno knew. I settled for a single word, meaningful enough to pre-empt further questions, but too meaningless to really tell Barno anything.

“Fate,” I answered.

Barno nodded knowingly.

“That makes sense. You have made sufficient enemies in your time. One of them was bound to catch up with you up sooner or later. Now tell me, Markus, how did you guess that Petar was my maker?”

I thought for a moment. The truth would not do at all, but I could give Barno an approximation.

“It wasn’t really a guess. Old Petar always pays special attention to the head and the voice of his Automatons. I consider him one of the great artists among the Animators. Even this Squeeze clearly shows his brush.”

“His brush?” Two metal hooks above Barno’s eyes

contracted, expressing confusion. I would have slapped my forehead if I'd had that much freedom of movement. Automaton are notoriously bad at understanding symbolism.

"I mean, his touch, his style." I waited for Barno to nod, understanding, then continued: "See how the cage is shaped like a large head, with eyeholes in front of my kneecaps, and a nose where my legs just fit? The nostrils would be just where my feet are. Petar made this Squeeze."

Petar must have installed tiny candles or other lights behind Barno's eyes, because they lit up in sudden discovery. The corners of his mouth turned out to be articulated, because they curled up in what was unmistakably a smile of delight. Petar, you are a true artist.

"Oh, I see! How wonderful! So that must mean you were just... peeing out the chin?"

The laughter welling up in me hurt my body in more ways than I would have thought possible, but it was worth it. It wasn't even the out-the-chin comment in itself; it simply was priceless to hear the word 'pee' from the mouth of one of the usually so well-spoken Automaton.

"Right you are, Barno, right you are!" I let another deep laugh roll before adjusting my position and cycling through another mini-workout, wincing at the extra pain. "Now, do you mind if I ask a few questions of my own?"

Barno inclined his head to one side, in a thoughtful pose that must have been entirely fake. I had never heard of any Automaton actually *thinking* about the answer to any question. Petar had had some fun with this one.

BEANS AND MARBLES

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

When Flight Control assigned us utility privileges, I don't think they expected me to brew espresso in the centrifugal head. But the weight of the espresso machine was well within the parameters they'd set, as was my use of a couple of ounces of fresh water and a fraction of the ship's power supply each day, so there was nothing, really, they could say or do about it. Privileges are privileges, and if the purpose was to give both of us something to keep us happy, it worked for me. My morning espresso ritual kept me sane. I looked forward to it every day.

Richard, however, wasn't quite as tolerant as Flight Control.

I finished the morning systems check and shoved myself away from the instrument panel with a practiced, one-handed gesture. I had done this hundreds of times before, so often in fact that there was a black smudge visible on the edge of the panel, a spot of the same sticky dirt-and-grease mixture that coated the curved back of my father's computer mouse back home.

Yeah, but let's not think about home, shall we?

The shove propelled me up into the empty spherical volume of the control room and sent me spinning along my axis. A measured push stopped me and I ended up facing the storage cabinets against the bulkhead, where we kept the supplies we needed while on duty. In the pocket-sized fridge, I found only one squeeze-bottle of drinking water, and I made a mental note to

re-supply later that day. Taking the bottle and closing the fridge, I moved to my personal cabinet and got out a measured portion of my traveling treasure.

Ah, those beans!

There is an art to buying coffee, and I knew I was an artist. I believe I spent weeks before departure selecting just the right blend of Brazilian bourbon Santos beans and mocha beans imported from South Yemen. My coffee supplier, the owner of a shabby little shop down by the Docks, was a *cafe*icionado like myself and hand-picked the plantations where he bought his coffee beans. He had supplied me with twelve pounds of excellent Santos and six pounds of the best mocha I'd ever tasted.

Better still, he had given me two airtight containers of Arabica seeds. I suspected he had acquired those by shady means, but I didn't care. When we arrived, I would be able to start my own coffee plantation. The scouting probe had sent back detailed maps and extensive exploration data, and I'd already picked out the perfect spot: high up in the hills near to the colony site, on a slope of ideal terra roxa soil. I would be the first – and only – coffee farmer of the first extraterrestrial colony.

I was looking forward to it.

I retrieved the espresso machine in its bag from my other cabinet and shoved off again – a similar smudge on the cabinet door – on a trajectory perpendicular to the previous one. Ending up on what Richard called the ceiling of the control room – a stupid name in zero gravity, but he insisted on it – I pressed the access button, and the circular door into the head slid open. With one practiced movement, I contorted myself into the small

cubicle with my burdens and started to set up my little coffee brewery.

Like all the previous times, I wondered what had possessed the engineers to install a standard power socket into the control room head and none in the living quarters. My espresso machine required both a power source and gravity. When I'd applied for espresso privileges, I'd assumed that there would be a socket by my bunk so I would be able to enjoy my morning cup in my own room.

It was only after we left the Earth's gravity well and hooked into the hyperstratum that our routine settled down enough for me to have my morning espresso. Only then did I discover that I couldn't. The living quarters were equipped with specialized sockets for the lightweight equipment developed for the trip. The only standard power sockets I could find were in the control room, where zero gravity prevented me from using the espresso machine.

Richard had come to the rescue, though I'm pretty sure he regrets it now.

"John!" he'd shouted. I'd swiveled in the pilot's seat and looked up at him where he floated by the round door. He wore a triumphant smirk, and I started smiling in anticipation of the joke he would deliver.

"Yeah?"

"Guess where your power socket is?"

I'd shaken my head in disbelief.

"Yep," he said, thumbing over his shoulder.

"In the head?"

MEETING THE SCULPTOR

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

Of all the consequences of the development of cheap and reliable time travel, the emergence of the art of Sculpting was the most controversial.

—Introduction to ‘History of the Morality of Art’, 2243

After the Y: Right arm

The tramp knocked the chili dog out of my hand as he stumbled obliquely across our path, muttering indistinct curses. Ketchup and mustard splattered my trouser leg. My right shoulder caught a glancing blow off one of his cartwheeling arms as he careened off the corner of the news stand and out into the car-crowded street.

We had stopped walking in the same instant, our frozen shapes reflected in the bookstore window. Sarah moved closer to me, sliding her right arm around my waist and clasping her left hand on my elbow. We watched motionlessly, our conversation forgotten. There was no time to move, to act.

This is how fast it can happen, I thought randomly in that one timeless, frozen instant. I felt every sensation being imprinted on my memory: the smell of exhaust and garbage and hot dogs,

the noises of traffic and shopping, Sarah's stiff, shocked form squeezed against me, the sunlight blurred by my cheap shades. I wanted to hug Sarah and avert her eyes, or reach out to the tramp and pull him back, or run away. But of course, there was no time, so I just looked on.

The tramp recovered his balance halfway into the first lane. He straightened and turned around, looking at me, but made no move to get back to safety. He just stood there, shouting a foreign word - or maybe an unusual name - at the top of his lungs, cursing. He didn't move.

And just before the Buick snapped his right leg, threw him into the fragmenting windshield and over the roof until he crashed to the asphalt like an empty suit; seconds before the car behind the Buick bumped over his inert body and stopped; minutes before the paramedics rolled his bleeding body into the ambulance and I dragged Sarah to the back doors and got in to ride with him to the Emergency Room; before the waiting room, and the blood-splattered grave-looking surgeon, and the tears and the closeness and all that followed, the tramp stood in the right lane and looked me in the eyes, and I understood, and I saw that he understood as well.

It was a terrible price to pay.

Glory Days

"Drive carefully now," Karen said. She spared me a quick smile, but was already turning away when I smiled back, and the door was closing. My old friend Richard cast a last unreadable

look through the gap before he pushed it shut. I stood still for a while, staring at the closed door. My eyes wandered over the wooden surface and picked out trivial details: scuff marks at the bottom, a half-removed sticker, scratches on the knob. I felt inexplicably angry and cheated.

Finally, I tore my stare away from the door, stepped away and turned down the driveway. Folding into the driver's seat of my beat-up Honda, I backed sloppily onto the street and gunned away from the curb. I knew I should probably not be driving with all the wine I had consumed, but at that moment I did not care. After my reckless departure had blunted the edge of my aggression, I did, however, manage enough self-control to ease down to the maximum speed.

I was too wound up to drive straight back home. I wasn't feeling much like spending endless insomniac hours in the house anyway, watching some old movie or mindless talk show and drinking myself into a stupor. What would be the point? Instead, I aimed the Honda for downtown, the lights, the people, the distraction. I told myself I wasn't looking for a bar, just for a wind-down after the disastrous dinner. But when I drove past Lou's and noticed the lights were on, I parked without a moment's hesitation and walked back to the familiar double doors.

I didn't see Lou. Two of the student types he'd taken to hiring were tending bar, and a peroxided waitress wandered lazily among the tables. The place was about half full and I took my time taking stock of the patrons. A couple of tables were taken by groups of students, loud-mouthed and boisterous. There was an

obvious first date going on at a secluded table back near the toilets, and going badly as far as I could see. Bob was getting drunk at his customary table. And here and there couples nursed their drinks and looked bored. The jukebox was playing Tom Jones.

There was a cute blonde at the bar, in her late twenties, well-packaged and well-stacked. She had that I-don't-give-a-damn air about her that's so sexy on beautiful women, a look that says she's seen it all, heard it all, is not interested. It seems to me that they learn that look after the first guy hits on them. But I wasn't about to be deterred. I walked up to the empty stool on her right side and sat down. Motioning to one of the bartenders, I said,

"Give me a Jack-rocks, and for the lady whatever she's having." I looked to my left and gave her my best smile. She looked me up and down with cold brown eyes, actually wrinkled her nose, and replied,

"I'm having to move." She swiveled her hips off her stool and moved a few stools down without sparing me another glance. Behind me, one of the students made a whistling noise, followed by a fair imitation of an explosion. His mates sniggered. Assholes.

"Just the Jack," I told the waiter. "A double."

The perfect ending to a perfect night.

I supposed I'd have to call Richard and apologize in the morning, though I didn't understand how things had deteriorated so suddenly. I had arrived for dinner at seven, brought a nice California red, complimented Karen on her hot dress, bear-hugged Richard like we used to do in high school. Karen had

cooked pasta, prepared fresh salmon, thrown together a nice salad. Over dinner, we talked about the good old days, reminisced about high school, college. We laughed, I perhaps a bit louder than they, and drank two bottles of wine. Maybe I did drink most of one bottle by myself. I don't really remember. I don't remember when everything changed between Richard and me either. We used to be best friends in high school, made it through college together, shared girlfriends. I remember I used to be the guy with all the girls, while Richard went from one hopeless infatuation to the next doomed affair. I really don't remember when the tables suddenly turned on me, how Richard ended up with this goddess of a woman, how all my friends hooked up, became husbands, fathers even, and why I'm still alone.

I do remember Karen exclaiming "Mark!" in a shocked and somewhat offended tone, and Richard walking back into the den and giving me a hard stare. Still, I don't think it was much of a pass. And what's the big deal between friends, right?

"Right," Lou replied.

I looked up from my drink, startled. I hadn't noticed Lou returning, nor had I realized that I was speaking out loud. There were more empty tumblers in front of me than I remembered drinking. I suddenly noticed that the noise from the students had gone, and that the first-date couple in the back was kissing passionately. The blonde had her back to me and her date threw me an amused glance over her shoulder.

"So what do you think happened, Lou?" I was disturbed to hear a plaintive whine in my voice. "What do you think they did?"

DIAMOND SHARKS

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

“Has anyone explained the anatomical details to you yet?” the surgeon said, as the two gowned and masked assistants shaved and disinfected my entire body. Turning my head to my right, I could see him through the reinforced glass, but his mouth was open to the water on the other side of the glass and his lips weren’t moving. Instead, his voice – or rather a synthesized approximation – came from the teletransponder mounted over the glass. He was floating in a vertical position, his perfunctory white coat billowing with each rush of exhaled water. Because I was lying on my back on the table and looking to my right, my whole perspective was tilted by ninety degrees, and his voice seemed to come from the transponder mounted to his left. The effect was disorienting.

I shook my head. I didn’t care about the details, though they had been explained to me at length in the admission procedure. All I knew was that I wanted the transition; I wanted this brave new life for myself.

Or for her.

The surgeon took my shaking head as an invitation to explain once more.

“We’re going to fit you with a set of custom-grown septals,” he said. “There is a number of known basic design plans available in nature. We’ve found that the septal design is best suited to the

human rib cage; the ribs and intercostal spaces correspond neatly to the structures you find supporting the septals in Earth sharks. It's also a design that is relatively easy to hook up to the pulmonary arteries. As a matter of fact, I have the same design myself."

I doubt if the surgeon was aware that I had no idea what he'd just told me. Like most scientists and medical professionals, he just liked to hear himself talk about his specialty. But the details really weren't important to me. I understood what the result would be; I knew what I was getting into. I phased out his explanation as one of the assistants hooked me up to an IV drip and the other connected the EEG and EKG electrodes.

I tuned back in to the surgeon's voice when his tone changed from pedantic to serious.

"Now there is one final formality for the record, Mr. McDonald. You've read and signed all the necessary forms, but because the process is irreversible, we are required by law to give you a last chance to change your mind."

"I'm not going to back out now," I said.

"Of course, but still..." His voice grew even more formal. "Mr. McDonald, are you absolutely sure you want to undergo the procedure?"

I sighed.

"Yes, I am."

"Very well. Susan, Achmed, final prep."

The blonde assistant moved towards a panel of valves and switches on the far end of the OR, while the dark-skinned one bent over me.

“Hello, Mr. McDonald,” he said through his mask. “You have experience as a scuba diver, yes?” I nodded. “Good. I need you to open wide now and bite down on this regulator. You will breathe through that until we get the intravenous oxygen up and running.”

I accepted the mouthpiece into my mouth and sealed my lips around it. Achmed mumbled “Good luck” and retreated. I heard the waterproof double doors hiss softly closed.

“Here we go,” Susan said with grating cheerfulness. A switch clicked, she spun a wheel on the panel. The hiss of the door closing behind her was drowned in the bubbling white noise of water flooding the OR.

* * *

Seven months earlier, snuggling close against me on my couch late at night, with soft candlelight flickering and glasses of wine on the coffee table, Varma had seized our moment of peace and closeness to get me talking about Yoko.

“I’m still listening, if you’re ready,” she said. The hesitance in her voice was impossible to mistake, as was the tension I felt under my hand, in the small of her back. I knew she was afraid I’d never tell her, never trust her enough to open up. But I thought I might be ready now. I kissed her and stared up at the ceiling, feeling the weight of her attention like a warm but rough blanket.

“Okay,” I said, and I felt her relax a bit. “I’ll give it a shot. Ask me again.”

I glanced at her face and saw momentary confusion. Then she smiled and repeated the question she'd first asked me three months ago, too soon after we'd gotten involved.

"What happened? Why did she leave you?"

I nodded before speaking.

"It wasn't very complicated, I guess. But maybe it was. Because we were happy. We really were. We were getting married after the war, after I got discharged. The whole thing. Pick a quiet colony somewhere, build a house, raise kids. Aw, shit. This is harder than I thought." I squeezed my eyes shut as Varma hugged me close.

"Take your time," she whispered. "We're not in a hurry."

I kissed her hair.

"Thanks. I guess I'm not so tough after all. I think I'm going to try and sneak up on it.

"I was in the Wahwan campaign. There was a mistake, an orbital strike called too early." I meant to just give her the facts, but I could hear the bitterness in my voice. "My squad was planetside when they started the irradiation."

A shocked gasp came from Varma as her hand involuntarily squeezed my chest.

"Oh baby..."

I tightened my arm around her. My stomach tightened with remembered agony.

"I spent five weeks in the M.S.S.H. They discharged me with full disability. It almost seemed like a good thing: I came home with this huge lifetime income and we thought we were set. All we had to do was pick out the perfect colony.

DUMB SON

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

Toby found his twelfth Trophy in the dumpster behind the Movierama, exactly where he'd found all the others. It was long, thin and strong, like a branch, but with a big knob on one end and a fat bit on the other. It was hidden under a big garbage bag with a plastic arm sticking out the side, an arm like his little sister's dolls had. The trophy was a lot bigger than the others and wouldn't fit into his old Scooby-Doo backpack, no matter how hard he tried. He tried to picture himself walking down Main Street with the knob sticking out of his pack, like a spaceman's antenna, but he just knew that would get him into Trouble.

It wouldn't fit into the basket behind the seat of his bike either. Some of the smaller trophies had fit there, hidden among the empty bottles and soda cans he collected. Not this one; it fell out when he tried to shove it in, spilling cans and bottles, one big bottle breaking into a million shiny pieces. It looked like he couldn't take the new Trophy with him.

The thought of leaving it behind really hurt. He felt his eyes sting and knew he was about to Bawl like a Baby. This big, it had to be a really important piece, though he would have to look at his Big Chart to know for sure. Putting it back in the dumpster would be a Disappointment, like the time they wouldn't let him into the Movierama even though he was already twenty-one, that's a two and a one.

Out of nowhere, he had an Idea. He was wearing his overalls, and the Trophy was about the same size as his thigh. He could lift up his sweatshirt and slide the Trophy into his overall leg. The first time he tried this, it just kept on sliding until the knob came out at his foot. When he tried to pull it out again, the knob got stuck on the cuff and wouldn't come back up. Toby was limping and cussing around the alley; it was a good thing no Townspeople walked by. They were plenty mean to him already without seeing him making a fool of himself. But it was Sunday morning, and they were all in Church, Toby knew.

He finally got the Trophy out of his overalls, turned it around and slid it back in. This way, the knob hooked over the side of the overall pants, and couldn't slide any further down. Toby took a few experimental steps. It felt weird and he had to limp a little, but he could walk. And with his sweatshirt back in place, nobody could see what he was carrying around. Pretty darn clever for a Dumb Son!

Toby hated his nickname. When someone shouted "Dumb Son" at him, he often got so mad he didn't know what he was doing. A few times he'd taken one of the pretty Coke bottles and thrown it at them. Once he'd even hit someone that way, and then he'd been in real Trouble. He'd had to go to the Sherriff's office, and the Sherriff had shouted at him, and his mom had picked him up and had shouted at him some more after they'd come home.

He knew how he'd gotten the nickname. He liked the little dumpling things you could get at the Chinese place, and one day he'd saved enough coins from the bottles and cans to go get some. Only he'd forgotten how they were called, so when the

little man with the black hair and the weird eyes asked him what he wanted, he'd said, "Dumb son". The little man had started laughing and calling out, "Dumb son! Dumb son!" Toby had run out of the Chinese place with burning cheeks. But all the other people in the Chinese place had heard it, and the next day someone had shouted it at him in the park.

He knew he really was dumb, and often wished he wasn't.

Toby walked out onto Main Street, pushing his bike by the handlebars, limping a little, feeling hot and flushed and a little scared. He hoped no one would shout his nickname. At every corner, he looked carefully for traffic before crossing. He passed the ice cream place, the bookstore where he'd gotten the Big Chart, the bright shop with the big windows where Mr. Daniels cut his hair every month. Across the street was the Sherriff's office, and Toby hurried along, though he wasn't sure he was doing anything wrong.

He slowed down a little when he got closer to the little park. In the middle of the park was his Secret Place, where he could sit for a really long time and no one would know where he was. His Secret Place was sort of in the basement of the music porch, the funny round house in the middle of the park that was all porch and no inside. Toby remembered when there used to be music there sometimes, with real instruments, but not for a long time now. Jonah, the man who played the really big horn, had been Toby's friend for a while. But when the band had stopped playing together, Toby hadn't seen Jonah around much anymore.

The music porch looked like old Mrs. Winston's house now, with the paint all gone bad and rot in the wood. The wind had

made big piles of leaves against the side of the music porch, and there were bushes on one side that had grown all crazy-like.

Toby had crawled in among the bushes one day, hiding from the Mean Kids, huddled against the side of the music porch, and found that he could pull out some of the wood and make a hole. He knew there was a room under the music porch, because it had a little door, but there was a chain and a lock on it. That first time, a splinter had hurt his hand, so he always carried his gloves with him, in case he wanted to go to his Secret Place, though sometimes he forgot. He never forgot his flashlight though, it was his favorite birthday present.

Leaning his bike against the music porch now, right next to the little steps, he crawled into the bushes. When he was deep enough, he took off his backpack and got out his gloves and his flashlight. He pulled on the gloves, making sure each finger fit snugly. The middle piece of wood got loose easy, like always. He worked the other two out, switched on his flashlight and climbed through the hole.

Once inside, the excitement of it all made him want to pee, but he told himself not inside. He shone his light over the music tables leaning against the opposite wall. He knew what those were for: the musicians put pieces of paper with lots of dots on them to know what to play. There was a bunch of boxes in a corner. And in the middle of the floor were all his Trophies.

He walked to where he'd pinned his Big Chart against the wall and slid his new Trophy from his overall. He was right: it was an important piece. He laughed aloud when he saw where it went: it was a thigh! He'd carried a thigh in his thigh!

WHAT HAPPENED WHILE DON WAS WATCHING THE GAME

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

The baby boy, exhausted with the exertions and impressions of the day, slept through it all. Through the rough shunting of the parking platform in the automated car park, and the metallic clang of the platform being locked down, he snored peacefully, his little head leaning obliviously against the car seat headrest. When the car door clicked open, he only made a tiny dissatisfied sound. The guttural muttering of the two that slid into the car and temporarily shared the back seat with him didn't penetrate his dreams. He never felt their small hands opening the clasps of his security harness, nor did he wake as they lifted him out of his seat, with a gentleness that belied their fierce appearance.

They maneuvered their tiny, sleeping burden out onto the platform and towards their exit, leaving the car empty and silent, as if no child had ever been in it at all.

* * *

“Hey, where's the kid?”

Marjorie froze with her back against the front door, balancing four grocery bags on her arms. She was torn between blind panic, and annoyance bordering on anger. Her rapid understanding of what had happened enabled her to quell the

panic. It did nothing, however, to stop her other reaction from blossoming into fury at her useless sack-of-shit excuse for a husband.

The worst of it wasn't that Don had shown no inclination to help carry the groceries, concentrating instead on sorting the mail as Marjorie struggled with the bags. Nor was it his trance-like preoccupation with the upcoming game.

At the moment, even leaving their child in the car came in second to calling him 'the kid'. This was taking his lackluster approach to fatherhood to new depths.

"His name," she hissed, "is *Donny*!"

To her satisfaction, the inane expression on his face was replaced by guilt; for an entire second, there was more than just the prospect of homeruns and no-hitters on his mind. Unfortunately, it was still not enough for him to draw the obvious conclusion.

"Yeah, Donny. Where is he?"

"You left him in the car, you idiot!"

He smiled sheepishly.

"Oops," he said.

Marjorie kept her cool. Donny had been tired enough to sleep for at least another hour, so there was plenty of time to get him before he noticed anything wrong.

Still, she had every reason to be concerned about him. He was still lying buckled into his car seat, which was on the back seat of their MPV. Which had been shuffled into the dark robotic bowels of the autopark.

Marjorie hated the autopark. She hated waiting her turn at

WHAT HAPPENED WHILE DON
WAS WATCHING THE GAME

the entrance. She hated operating the control panel. But most of all, she hated waiting minutes for the car to appear. She knew too well how long it took the system to retrieve their Buick; she'd left enough house keys, handbags, or sunglasses in it.

But never Donny. Never her own flesh and blood.

Don made no move to go back down for his son, instead looking pointedly at his watch. She considered standing her ground and making him choose between the first inning and the safety of their child. But that was a choice their marriage might not survive, and a confrontation she wasn't ready for. Yet.

"For God's sake!" she said. Shoving the groceries into his chest, she made her way around him and pressed the call button.

Behind her, she heard paper tearing and heavy objects thumping and crashing to the floor. A cloud of flour billowed around her as she stepped into the elevator.

* * *

Of course, it was only her imagination that the autopark took twice as long to produce the Buick. Or so she told herself.

Down in what she refused to call the control room, she'd operated the control panel with an efficiency born of concern for her baby. Instead of her usual fumble around the different buttons and switches, she went rapid-fire through the entire sequence, pausing only, in irritation, when she had to enter their four-digit PIN number.

Of course, Don had selected the PIN digits, and every time she had to operate the autopark, she squirmed at the memory of

his almost religious rant about the mind-numbing statistics of long-dead athletes. Who *cared* about the difference between batting average and slugging percentage, or whatever they were called? If he would spend half the brain power he wasted on Lou Gehrig's statistics on remembering her birthday, their marriage would be in half the trouble it was.

3-4-0-4, she punched in, and through the large window into the autopark she could see and hear the device come alive with metallic grumbling noises. An interminable period of squeaking, clanging and grinding later, the garage door rumbled up that separated the parking bay from the autopark. Any moment now, the robotic parking platform carrying their car would grumble gracelessly into the bay. Marjorie made her way around the control panel to the door leading down into the bay. She didn't want to waste a single *minute* rescuing Donny from the car seat.

When the platform slid into the bay and the garage door closed, it took a moment for Marjorie to understand what was wrong.

The car wasn't there.

Marjorie fired off a string of curses that would have impressed her husband. This was the third time this had happened since they'd moved into the building. She toyed with the idea of calling Don down and have him deal with the problem. But she still didn't feel up to wrestling with his precious baseball fetish. Calling Maintenance wasn't a real option either. Their dim-witted handyman Jake needed three weeks to replace a busted light bulb, and two months to deal with boiler problems. And the last time the autopark had malfunctioned, all Jake had done was hand-

WHAT HAPPENED WHILE DON
WAS WATCHING THE GAME

crank the inner garage door and retrieve the purse she'd left on the passenger seat.

Marjorie could do that much herself.

As she edged past the empty parking platform, a little voice whispered that she wouldn't be acting this rashly if Don hadn't been so useless. She knew a part of her was doing this to prove she didn't need him. Let him cheer his slugging heroes, slump in his favorite chair and drink his Bud, while she saved Donny, presented him to his father in triumph, and then... Yes, that was the question, wasn't it? What then?

The inner garage slid up as she worked the manual crank. With apprehension, she looked into the widening hole. When it was high enough to pass through, she took the small stainless steel flashlight from her purse and stepped onto the platform. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she was really doing this. A fleeting thought made her take out her cell phone and quick-dial 1. Don answered after six rings.

"What!"

"Don, the car won't come out. I'm going into..."

"HE WAS SAFE, GODDAMMIT!"

It was a measure of her faith in her husband that she didn't think for a moment he was referring to his son.

"Yeah, what was that, hon?" Don added.

"I'm going..."

"HOLY COW, STOLEN BASE!"

'He's taking a pretty big lead down there,' Marjorie added automatically, and that seemingly innocuous quote gave her a disturbing sense of urgency, making her shiver.

PRISONER OF WAR

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

In the third year of the Junior Wars, we captured one. We dragged it to the castle kicking and screaming, fighting us every step of the way. It bit Marco in the shoulder, hard, and for a minute there the rest of us were fingering our weapons, eyeing him with a mixture of fear and incipient hatred, though we knew it wasn't contagious. Not that way at least. Marco's shoulder bled a little, and he developed a slight infection in the days that followed, but nothing worse.

We dragged it hastily across the lowered drawbridge, across the courtyard with the portcullis rattling closed behind us, into the small wooden door and down the winding staircase to the crypt. Hastily, because Jay and I, at least, had recognized it.

Him. Recognized him. Dragged him. Him, not it.

I'm getting worse. But it's so much easier to dehumanize them, to think of them as animals, as nameless enemies. We all know what happened to the ones that couldn't.

We locked the Junior in an empty storage room, bolting the door and blocking it with a stack of canned food boxes. Through the thick walls, the wood and the muffling boxes, we could still hear him rant and rave and slam his body against the door. Making our way back into daylight, the three of us exchanged an uncomfortable glance. When Marco looked away, Jay caught my eyes and raised his eyebrows. I shrugged, then shook my head. I

didn't quite trust Marco, but he'd never been very observant. I was sure he'd not seen what Jay and I had. Almost sure.

Up by the corner staircase between the southeast and southwest wings, Loot was waiting for our debriefing. Even with the world falling apart around us, or maybe because of it, Loot insisted on maintaining the chain of command. That's why we called him Loot, and that's why it was Marco, our nominal sergeant, who paced off to report in.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Jay whispered, "You sure?"

"Yeah," I mouthed back. "Smoke?"

Jay took the hint and smiled a small, sad smile. We made our way up to the southeast battlements, greeted Tim standing guard at the south tower and walked up to the gate tower, where we could catch the last rays as we smoked our smokes and discussed our prisoner. Looking down across the courtyard, I noticed that Loot and Marco had gone inside. Doubtless Loot had insisted on having the debriefing in the armoury.

I lit two Camels and handed Jay one. Dragging deeply, we sat back against the battlements for a minute, unwinding as the nicotine did its magic. The silence wasn't quite comfortable, and Jay broke it.

"Maybe you're right. I wasn't sure myself. Marco hardly knew them, right?"

"Hardly," I agreed. "He had no kids of his own. D'you know he requested a house away from Suburbia when he transferred?" Suburbia had been our pet name for the residential area at the base, a cluster of identical bungalows with identical swing sets

and trikes and inflatable pools in the yard. It was where us career soldiers lived with our families and our kids played. Marco, as a single man, had chosen to live in a shack down behind the landing strip.

Jay nodded.

“But you’re positive?”

“Yeah. He’s grown skinny, and his hair is way longer, but it’s him. And his bat, too, with the blue tape. The kid used to play ball with my own kids. Back when.”

“Jesus, Sam.” I could see he’d made the connection with the weapon.

“Yeah.” I flicked away my cigarette butt. It spiralled down to the courtyard. I’d have to pick it up later.

“Maybe we should tell her. Or at least Loot.”

I shook my head.

“D’you really think she could handle it? ‘Cos I don’t. And Loot’s just too straight—he’d go straight to her.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Jay said. He stubbed out his cigarette on the medieval stone of the battlement. “I’m gonna go get fresh. Are you coming down yet?”

I shook my head again.

“I’ll sit in the sun for a bit. Get the prisoner some food, will you?” He nodded and got up slowly, wincing a little. He’d taken some blows in the ambush.

* * *

TRICK OR TREAT

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

“Mom, it itches!”

“For God sake, don’t scratch.”

Jane pulled her son’s right hand roughly away from his expertly painted face.

“You’ll smear the whole design. Just leave it be, the itch will pass.”

“But mom...”

“No buts, Sander. I worked on your skull face for an hour. Let’s try and keep it intact for more than a minute, ‘kay?’”

Sander’s face was a grinning skull painted in an unhealthy shade of dull creamy white. His own dark eyes all but disappeared into the black holes Jane had drawn around them; his nose was a sharp black triangle; gaping and crooked teeth were painted over his lips. Jane had used a black dye to color his hair, though most of his head would be hidden under his cowl.

From the wide sleeves of his rough brown robe peeked fingers painted the same unpleasant white, and long yellow nails. His left hand clutched the shaft of the perfect prop Jane had found in Poppa’s shed: a kid-sized scythe, too dull to be dangerous, but otherwise perfectly convincing. She had no idea why her father would own a tool like that, but it fitted perfectly with the Grim Reaper Sander wanted to be this Halloween.

Jane was proud of the costume job she’d done on her son,

very proud. But even to herself, even though she'd spent hours preparing his costume and dressing him, he was spooky.

He looked like Death incarnate.

"Okay," he said, and that eleven-year-old voice coming from between the bone-white painted jaws was disconcerting. He turned from his mother and started for the door.

"Aren't you forgetting something, young man?"

Sander stopped and turned around with a suddenness that startled his mother. For just a moment, his robe had billowed around him and it seemed that he was wielding the scythe, not just holding it. Jane took an involuntary step backwards.

"What, mom?"

For a moment, Jane forgot to answer her son. Then she absently reached for the thing on the side table.

"Here, sweetie," she said.

"Ah no mom! Come on, I'm eleven!"

His protest shook her out of it.

"Sander," she said, sitting up straighter on the couch, "You know this is the deal. You get to keep the candy that fits in here, no more. And don't push your luck, buster—you know how I feel about candy."

"Aw mom." There was a slight whine in his voice, but he grabbed the lunch box with a brief smile. Jane had bought him the Scooby-Doo lunch box four years earlier and it was the perfect Halloween candy container, with images of the ghosts, mummies, monster spiders and villains the clumsy cartoon dog had fought in the TV series.

Sander objected to the lunch box every year; he wanted to

bring his tote bag like other kids and take home all the candy he could carry. Jane was adamant though. She was determined to keep his teeth good and his body healthy.

“Now scoot!” she said, getting up from the couch and herding him to the door.

Sander reached for front door, and Jane was pleased to see he was careful enough not damage the artificial nails as he opened it.

As the door swung outward, a knob of white swung down, almost knocking Sander in the head. He knocked it out of his way with his scythe without a pause, mumbling, “We should have a real bone.”

Jane came after him and stood in the doorway, watching him go. The quiet suburban street, its orderly succession of driveways and lawns lit by jack-o-lanterns and strings of unseasonable Christmas lights, was already the domain of small groups of children dressed up as their favorite scary characters. Most of them seemed to have found inspiration in the grimmer fairy tales, though more and more of the kids dressed up like Hollywood serial killers—or their victims.

“Have fun!” she called after her son. He waved without looking back.

Shaking her head, Jane adjusted the plastic bone over the door and went back inside. Closing the door and grabbing her unopened mail, she proceeded to turn off all the lights in the house. Then, with the mail and her latest reading project under her arm and a glass of Merlot in her hand, she made her way to the back yard and settled in her deck chair with a reading light.

MASHUP

BY FLORIS M. KLEIJNE

Told you so.

In his mind, David could already hear the smugness in Otto's voice. It was infuriating.

Even more infuriating than the ad itself.

At his implant's next chime, David had perked up with happy anticipation of the latest suggestion from his Orakl Gen4. He had picked up the device at the Orakl outlet on Broadway last night, and already he was totally smitten with the new AWOS. He hoped the kick of getting a new suggestion would not wear off any time soon. So far it had helped him catch a theatre performance last night that he would otherwise have missed, buy a couple of his favorite shirts at a huge discount, and hook up for coffee with a college pal who happened to be in Manhattan that morning. Cooler still—though eerier, because his car didn't have the Orakl interface—it had suggested a sorely needed gas stop. David could only assume it had extrapolated his cloud-stored behavior patterns. Eeriest, and therefore coolest—or, in Otto's words, creepiest—was the moment when the gorgeous default Orakl contralto whispered, “look up, David,” just in time for him to catch the soundless departure of the ISS ferry.

He couldn't remember the last time he had been this excited about a new gadget. He'd kept his cool through the purchase, not even fidgeting while the sales guy set about downloading his

settings from the Orakloud. But the moment the transaction was complete, his stomach started fluttering, and his brain felt like it was filled with helium. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, he worked the new UI with nervous fingers.

“Hello, David,” the voice sounded softly in his ears. That was one rumor confirmed: the Gen4 team had decided to bypass the built-in speakers if the user had implants. He could see how that might become annoying at some point, and made a mental note to ferret out the relevant setting. But for now, he was all for letting this sexy voice whisper her tips and recommendations. Remembering an oldies actress he had lusted over as a teenager—Connor? Connery?—he had decided to nickname the voice Jennifer.

But now, only a day later, he remembered an oldie about Wall Street, and her voice suddenly sounded a lot like a Gekko to him.

“Hi David,” Jennifer had whispered after the chime. He had nodded twice, allowing her to continue. “There’s a new club opening tonight, The Giraffe. I can get you one—or two—VIP tickets at a great price.”

“*What?*”

Startled faces turned to him before hurrying along in the direction of The Village. A quick rush of embarrassment flushed his cheeks at having shouted out loud. But the anger quickly took precedence.

He *hated* clubs. He hated the noise, hated the mindless drivel that passed for music there, hated dancing. He hated the see-and-be-seen mentality, the white lines on bathroom sinks, the casual

VIP room sex. He hated fancy cocktails at twenty bucks a shot, hangovers, crowds, sweaty bodies pressed together—at least, in numbers greater than two. He wouldn't go to a club if they paid him. And he hated new club openings twice over. In fact, with all their other differences, Otto and he were remarkably alike in their hatred of the Big Apple club scene. American Psychos, all.

Told you so.

David could accept that his new Orakl couldn't get it absolutely right every single time. Calibration, a limited data set, it all made sense. Even the manual said it was a lot like starting a new relationship.

But this was too much. No amount of misinterpretation of his cloud history could lead even a halfwit AI to suggest that he go clubbing.

It had to be an ad.

Fair enough, Otto. Even a paranoid gets it right sometimes.

* * *

“So you're getting the Gen4?”

Otto had thrown out the question like a challenge and bitten down on his bagel, chunks of avocado and gobs of mayonnaise squeezing from between the whole-wheat bagel and avalanching down his chin. He wiped his face with the back of his hand in an absent-minded gesture David knew well, like he knew and recognized the monomaniac cast to Otto's eyes and the determined smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. This was Otto going into mental overdrive, his paranoid glands hitting

maximum production, the world disappearing around him as ever-expanding convoluted conspiracy scenarios unrolled in his mind.

It meant that the next bout in their ongoing verbal fencing match was about to commence.

En garde!

“Yes, I am getting the Gen4,” David attacked, with a broad anticipatory smile. “And don’t start in on me again, Otto. If you want to stick with your ancient iPhone, that’s your thing. But some of us like to keep up with their own decennium, if you don’t mind.”

Otto parried and riposted.

“I don’t mind, if you don’t mind becoming their marionette within the next month. There’s...”

“I’m not...”

For a few seconds, their voices clashed as they fenced for control of the conversation. Otto gained the upper hand.

“... and you’ll be tramping from one new coffee shop to the next inane night club, buying tons of crap you don’t need, watching brain detergent daytime TV, eating crappy food and having crappy sex, all because your *oracle* tells you to. And they will sit back and cash their stock options and laugh themselves hernias. You’re so gullible!”

From anyone but Otto, it would have been offensive, but David smiled and parried with relish.

“Gullible? I’m gullible? Who’s the one eating up this left-wing squatter pamphlet propaganda without even checking if it makes any sense at all? You haven’t the first clue about Orakl

tech, Otto, and you know it! First of all, this thing—” He tapped the black oblong casing of the Orakl Gen3 between them on the diner table—” doesn’t tell me what to do, it just pops up useful information based on what I might be about to do...”

“Same difference.”

“No, it’s not! *I* decide, *I* choose, and this—” tapping it again— “just pops up the specifics. Like, it’s Sunday, and about 11 am, and it’s learned from previous Sundays that I always go hang out with you at Capu around noon, right? And I have the double with extra milk, hold the cinnamon, and you have the large black with unrefined sugar, and the biobrownie, and I often get a slice of strawberry cheesecake, right? So it asks me if I’m doing Capu today, and pops up a suggestion to pre-order our usuals, right, and I *accept*. And later—” David paused for breath— “Later, I’m on my way here and I pass near my favorite clothing store, and it’s learned my taste in shirts, right, and picks up a sale from the AW, that’s the Ambient Web for Cro Magnons like you, and suggests I make a detour and pick up some shirts, but I *decline*. It’s a convenience thing, you know. It...”

“Convenience? *That’s* your argument? You know the kind of shit that’s been pulled in the name of *convenience*? Fossil fuels were convenient; slaves were convenient; asbestos was convenient; just about every war there ever was, was convenient for someone. Hell, Anya was convenient, wasn’t she?”

And there she was again. Even though they’d been friends for twelve years, forgiveness was not something Otto did well. Two years ago, David had gone out with Otto’s kid sister a few times, and on the third date they’d gotten falling-down drunk and

ended up in her bed, doing the nasty. It turned out that the blessing Otto had bestowed on their dating didn't extend that far.

What didn't help was it all ended in tears when David broke up with her later. He had done his best to let her down easy, but Anya's crush had been huge, and for all his flakiness Otto was a great believer in the relative thicknesses of blood and water.

Anya had forgiven David within a couple of months, and they still hung out together sometimes. More than Otto did, anyway. She'd been with her current boyfriend for over a year, a music freak like herself and a much better match. She and David had even grown into the occasional joke about their misguided fling.

Otto claimed he'd forgiven David for breaking his kid sister's heart, and their friendship hadn't suffered. But in their verbal fencing, Otto would always manage somehow to drag the affair into it. When that happened, David had learned through painful experience to ignore the feint and counter-attack.

"As if convenience is evil, Otto! You have TiVo, yeah? You autocomplete your texts, yeah? Come to think of it, if convenience is so bad, why haven't you thrown out that relic of a phone? It's convenient to be online all the time, isn't it? God, for a bleeding-heart lefty you're reactionary as hell, you know that? The only thing this... brilliant device does, is taking away... helping with... It's about the drudgery of details, you know? I decide to go to the gym, and the AWOS suggests a training program and reminds me to bring my towel. The decision is mine, but my Orakl knows what that decision entails. It's like a..."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Floris M. Kleijne was born and raised in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, where he began writing short stories as soon as he learned to build sentences. Twenty years and a hundred stories later, when he finally accepted that the Dutch short story market is in fact non-existent, he switched to the English language and promptly sold his first story, 'Deep Red'. His second and third stories appeared in volumes XX and XXI of the Writers of the Future anthologies ('Conversation with a Mechanical Horse' and 'Meeting the Sculptor', respectively). Floris continues to live in Amsterdam, with a wonderful wife, two cheerful sons, a moody cat, and thousands of books. His website is on <http://www.floriskleijne.nl/>.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jonathan Rollins has short fiction, poetry, and non-fiction published in Allegory, Earthships, The Alibi, Inside Kung-Fu, and Black Belt Magazine. He is also an illustrator with work appearing in Jim Baen's Universe and Spacesuits & Sixguns. Jonathan's latest info can be seen at jonathanrollins.livejournal.com and his on-line art gallery can be viewed at jtrollins.cgsociety.org

Imagine:

The axe murderess you survived ten years ago continues to threaten your dreams.

Naked and caged, you plot your vengeance upon the Mage who destroyed your family and took your throne.

A time-traveler offers to change your whole miserable life around—but the offer comes at a price.

In pursuit of the love of your life, you sacrifice everything—even your humanity.

It's Halloween, and time for trickin' and treatin'. But is all that candy good for you, or bad—or worse?

A dispute with your best friend about the benefits of the Ambient Web turns suddenly grim when his sister is kidnapped.



Ten short stories of imaginative fiction by Dutch author Floris M. Kleijne, including the award-winning novelette *Meeting the Sculptor*. Read more about his fiction on www.floriskleijne.nl.

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